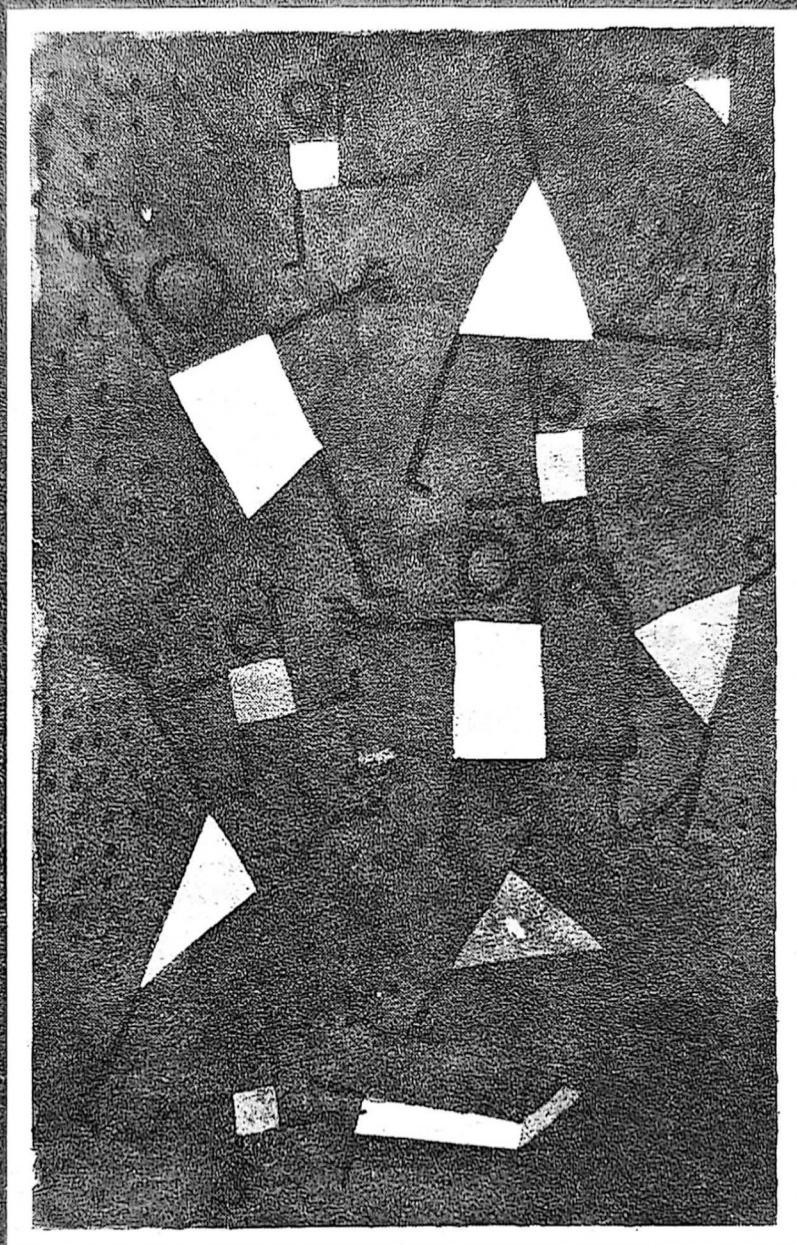


# DANCES OF THE OBSCURE

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PENTTI SAARIKOSKI

---



TRANSLATED FROM THE FINNISH BY  
MICHAEL COLE & KAREN KIMBALL

10 -

(AS IS  
SOME  
PEN)  
OP

---

## DANCES OF THE OBSCURE

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Grateful acknowledgement is extended to *Chelsea*, *Ironwood*, *Kairos*, and *Webster Review*, in which sections of the translation first appeared. Special thanks are also due to Mia Berner for her encouraging correspondence and permission to translate the Finnish original, and to Ulla Muranen for her critical reading of the manuscript.

The cover of this edition is illustrated with Paul Klee's *Tänze vor Angst* (*Dancing for Fear*), a watercolor dating 1938 and held by the Klee Foundation in Bern.

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This is the first edition.

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**The translators dedicate this volume to their families.**

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# DANCES OF THE OBSCURE

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PENTTI SAARIKOSKI

---

TRANSLATED FROM THE FINNISH BY  
MICHAEL COLE & KAREN KIMBALL

LOGBRIDGE-RHODES

---

tyttö  
kaunis kuin voikukka  
otti minua kädestä ja sanoi  
Minä olen valo joka johdatan sinut pimeään  
Sadossa ei ole kehumista kun nostan perunoita  
kesä oli kuiva, minä olin laiska  
kaunis kuin voikukka  
Meidän on nukuttava limittäin  
jalat koukussa  
näitä sänkyjä ei ole tarkoitettu meidän kokoisillemme ihmisiille  
Puhelen harakoiden kanssa että kaikki  
maailman ihmiset  
ovat minun lapsiani ja sinä olet valo  
kaunis kuin voikukka johdatat  
minut pimeään  
Olen syönyt hyvän ja pahan tiedon, taivas on pilvessä  
filosofiat ja poliikit taittuvat kuin kuivat oksat

kun olin delegaatio ja teoria  
Haravoin lehtiä, lasken  
minun kahdeksas syksyni täällä  
meri on musta, minä mietin  
kirjettä keisarille, halveksin häntä  
Mitään niin vihreätä ei ole  
kuin vuorten rinteet aamulla auringon noustessa

---

## DANCES OF THE OBSCURE

---

a girl  
beautiful as a dandelion  
took my hand and said  
I'm the light that leads you into darkness  
The harvest is nothing to brag about when I dig potatoes  
the summer was dry, I was lazy  
beautiful as a dandelion  
We have to sleep, our bent  
legs overlapping  
these beds aren't meant for people our size  
I tell the magpies that all  
the world's people  
are my children and you are the light  
beautiful as a dandelion you lead  
me into darkness  
The sky is cloudy, I have eaten good and bad knowledge  
philosophies and politics break off like dry twigs

when I was the delegation and the theory  
I raked leaves, I have counted  
my eighth autumn here  
The sea is black, I thought about  
writing to the emperor, I despise him  
There is nothing as green as  
a hillside in morning sunrise  
I was a mycologist, self-taught  
I went into the woods and held it  
I saw color, I bit off a piece on my tongue  
tasted it then spit it out  
Now I'm here

---

some sour rye and cheese  
on the table, a bottle of wine, some cigarettes, some apples  
on the floor a rusty brown autumn glow in a blue coffee pot  
I eat some sour rye and cheese  
I drink wine and smoke a cigarette  
Now I wash some apples  
I cut reeds in the autumn glow  
The car drives along the highway, turns into the yard  
I try to speak simply enough for an adult to understand  
the car drives along the highway, turns into the yard  
the house is painted white

I am the road  
I walk along  
with such effort — a delegation, a theory —  
I was an old authoritative man  
chosen  
to climb a mountain, a pedestal  
from which to see the world  
tilled fields, the sea  
people at work, a laborer  
turns a grindstone, a farmer  
surveys  
his freshly plowed field, in the post office  
they sort mail and in the cemetery  
crosses decay  
I have gone up the mountain to say goodbye  
to poetry, here they are, they carve statues  
I don't need to drop names anymore  
they wrote books, they founded religions, they ordered  
their own embalming and were embalmed  
At first there wasn't a bear's raspberry patch  
the berries came in small  
when we finally got some rain, they were waterlogged  
I sat on a rock, on the rock where I now sit

---

I thought

This world is nothing but a graveyard  
and a parting, as the last one  
I go to where there are no farewells  
no cross rotting on a grave  
darkness comes and the days  
are loosened from each other like stinking train cars  
Those who are free from the sun's tutelage  
don't create art  
which all the churches  
curse, I have seen  
the hand gesture, I can never forget it

You weren't summoned here and you aren't here  
cities, evenings

I miss evenings and loneliness which is the only experience  
I also long for that town where the telephone book  
is a bibliophilic rarity

I sat there on the river bank not thinking about anything  
later it's another town

but was it spring or summer

I read a great poet's lines about house walls  
Loneliness, cities

where the traffic is jammed

though the streets are wide and there are few cars

now I understand why this is inevitable

but I don't want to try to explain it

something is missing, the day has arrived like a blighted potato

I sat in a boat

others

have long since died or live somewhere in another city

---

A push doesn't shorten the night  
smoke settles to the ground  
now I begin to remember  
I had found a boot in the dump  
and hung it from the ceiling  
I put the right-sized tin pot in the shoe  
I tied another rope to the cord from which the boot hung  
and its free end to my suspenders  
now I had an ashtray  
A push doesn't shorten the night nor a song broaden a  
spade  
Now I remember, smoke settled to the ground  
I held an alder branch  
I had joined the work force

Obscurity dances  
by himself, the trees don't speak to him  
a bird  
doesn't look  
the bear has gone to his den  
to sleep, he no longer thinks about waking  
Obscurity dances  
he has forgotten  
not only what happened, but his memory  
studied spiders, a web  
is a spider's face and fingerprints  
The trees have something else to do, they have to  
shake off their leaves

Obscurity dances  
he administered government business, knew it well,  
knew his subjects' spiritual life  
their conduct  
One spider's web is like no other's, it dissolves with the  
evening  
it can't be repaired, the spider doesn't die

---

Obscurity dances

in his duties the government official had tried to  
prove that his colleagues based their view  
of government

economics

on the one hand on wishful thinking  
about their own resources

and on the other on the  
economic inexperience of leaders in neighboring states  
The bird doesn't look, the bushes are rigid as stalactites  
the spider doesn't die, the web just dissolves, morning  
dew

is thin threads, hair

Obscurity dances  
he thought

the sun was

new every day  
like a spider's web

He thought that the bear's sleep is his work and that  
a dreamworld was the basis of the universe  
he went into a cool grove

where the thinkers met  
I drink wine and talk

Obscurity dances, the bear sleeps

it's a place to start — soon the spider is spinning again —  
His theory doesn't strike the philosophers as interesting  
a dog, on closer look

an Egyptian princess  
followed by two servants  
came forward to greet me

I could interest her in nothing

I showed her a painted dartboard, an English one  
it's a black disk with yellow rays of light  
emanating from the center

I said its beams don't go beyond the circle and I showed her

I explained, here in the north  
the sun will hang  
all winter in a tree branch  
My father's strength is greater than the sun's  
the princess said  
don't form any clubs or organizations

The wind is coming up, I'm coming home  
from gathering mushrooms

I have some mushrooms in a basket  
On the road the shadows of grains of sand are long  
even though it's just noon

with a proud eye I look at the mushrooms I've found  
If I didn't know I live in that house I would think  
happy people live there

my handwriting gets crumpled and constricted, writing is  
my skin

At home I start to make stewed mushrooms  
I remember, only last year  
there were so many people in the house and on the farm  
now there is no one  
it seems oppressive  
the potato kettle mutters

They aren't living people  
they died long ago, those to whom I spoke,  
but death did not separate them from me  
life separated me from them

I studied a map, the boundaries  
didn't always meet  
it turned out to be lakes  
some deep lakes  
some shallower lakes  
ponds and pools would remain between profiles

well then how would toes, cold toes, meet  
when the tropics are rooted to each other

---

Horses eat bread from my hand, night turns  
like the emperor who can't get to sleep in his broad bed  
I said fifty-five alder leaves  
when the tax collector kept asking what I own

The boundary is from the junipers to the stone wall  
I looked for a wine bottle which I had hidden somewhere  
A girl with her nose in the air, came licking ice cream and said  
you are strange  
you always seek the road  
off the mountain out of the woods  
and away from your darkness  
you cry out  
some of your dead friends  
whom you miss  
like a bald head misses its hair, don't you understand  
An arrogant girl licked ice cream  
you don't realize that  
in the darkness  
the red's red  
the red of a frostbitten lingonberry looks black  
this has happened to your friends  
I am the light  
that leads you into darkness  
and then you see cows, six black speckled cows  
in the green fields  
— a massive skeleton  
fleshy, fatty limbs  
a splendid healthy herd, six dairy cows  
gulls peck the humus  
for worms and other wrigglers  
a cow has four stomachs  
first food goes to the rumen  
then from the first stomach to the reticulum  
from the reticulum it goes back up to the mouth  
now the cow lays down, legs bent under it

---

and chews its cud, it is thinking for a cow and it thinks  
it is a long time before the food  
    reaches the third stomach  
        and travels to the fourth, the rennet  
            from there it goes on  
and the only remaining intellectual exertion the cow has  
            with the food  
                is to get rid of it

My birth had nothing to do  
    with anything portentous  
        or supernatural  
    the time that I fell into  
wasn't interesting, even in educated circles  
    indeed there were still those  
        who sometimes believed in one god or another  
        but among the gods there wasn't one  
    who would have boasted that he created man, a dull time,  
Not more than two  
    or three  
        thousand years, then it was over  
Men should not have begun their studies of nature  
    why should one study it  
        the labyrinth was a mere fraud, I myself  
        built it, it's not a metaphor  
        and I didn't kill any monster  
or found democracy  
    or teach the town maidens a dance pattern  
A dull time  
    there is nothing noble in war anymore  
        hiding their faces, men crawl on all fours  
to wagons which are the only lights on ever-darkening roads

The *Lady Ellen* sails  
to where neither  
the moth eats nor rust harms  
nor

creditors make their demands — it takes money  
His dream realized, Aristotle sits in the cabin  
and looks at the sea  
he looks in such a way  
that the sea seems to look back at him  
what does he think

he thinks about yesterday's appearance  
on television, he is satisfied  
ingratitude is the world's reward, he said

The *Lady Ellen* sails  
now we sail past the island that's  
like a seal sinking in the water  
Aristotle  
moves to the deck, gasping a little  
for fresh air, we'd soon be  
in international waters, if I take the tiller  
he said to the skipper  
Here I may have reason to point out  
that those who kept me busy are dead  
and unborn gods

In this time of angels, I see nothing very puzzling

you walk past the fish church and glance all around  
from a helicopter they film you for the TV screen  
so you'll look like the inconsequential man you are  
they ask you what you like  
about this Aristotle and his brother  
Strange men, you say  
both nice and clever men  
I sit  
on the liar's bench

---

there at the wall of the fish church  
a bad taste rises from the pit of the stomach to the mouth  
Eyes shaded  
you walk across the market square  
the helicopter dropped lower  
to film your crushed hand when it grasps the door handle  
then  
you sit in a cafe opposite me, we drink coffee  
you say  
that they've been good men after all  
then you recalled for me the fine summer day  
when you took me to the home shore  
the boat puttered so pleasantly

You have to  
get rid of  
the world view that you can  
see the world  
There are scabs on the potatoes, milk sours, if you want  
to safely cross the street cross  
when the traffic light turns red

The delight of picking mushrooms is being with someone  
people shout to each other so they won't be separated  
they take cigarette breaks  
now here we sit and smoke cigarettes  
the squirrel is an agile animal but the rabbit  
what do you have against the rabbit  
when it lifts  
its back legs like that  
like what  
its hind legs are shorter than the front legs  
just like a man's  
but they aren't called front legs, they are called hands  
When we sit here we speak like this  
people look into each other's baskets and showoff

what they have just picked  
The berry picker's work  
is solitary  
even though you are with a friend  
you can only take pride in the amount  
more diligently or fastidiously picked  
We spoke of these things and we smoked cigarettes  
the nutritive value of berries is no less than mushrooms  
but the berry picker's social status  
is lower than the mushroom gatherer's  
With mushrooms, the most important thing is quality  
with berries, it is amount, we discussed this while smoking  
Sometimes a mushroom gatherer  
and a berry picker  
meet each other, coming from different directions  
they don't nod or say hello  
they both sit on the stump  
that is also the elk's traffic signal  
and what else do they say  
they chat, tear off   
moss and smell autumn in it, cautiously  
they probe for  
a possible friendship  
I hope this was understood, now it is blowing, it is storming  
look how differently pine and spruce branches act  
when it storms, study it   
The sky grows humble  
and thinking  
doesn't lead to anything  
we are always  
lost

---

From those woods I think you could flush out  
The thirty thousand slaves needed in  
Laurion silver mines  
they create the physical basis of Sophocles' life's work  
and for Pericles' work that led to Athens' downfall  
This is Aperion  
the ideology of never-completed growth  
that you need  
to think your thought to its conclusion  
in the evening  
god  
rides along the mountain ridge  
his forehead presses against the horse's neck  
he seems somehow depressed

I climb a tree  
to see what happens

as the horse tries to work his way down the icy road  
But you can't see better from the tree

From this house I remember only  
the shadows of the staircase railing  
on the wall beneath the entrance hall window  
The way up and down is the same  
we were young, we were friends  
or were we really

Red lathwork paths criss-cross the garden lawn

they're needed for building, the sustaining idea  
Was that people are more important than houses  
the way is one and the same, the trip  
wasn't a utopia for us now we are *topos*  
we are seated, we eat bream  
you've caught the fish  
and prepared it well

First, if you remember, we talked, now we are the topic of  
conversation  
We are tangible abstractions

---

the sun is setting, before he grasps this  
a man  
is destroyed

because he doesn't understand the link between beginning  
and end

At the dentist they fed my tooth into the computer  
now even that  
freedom is gone

at least when chewing bread, you feel  
like yourself, but they — the two percent —  
are in power

and want to know the condition of the subjects' teeth  
because it has an effect on the condition of the soul  
thus one can keep a file on people dangerous to society  
on the basis of the condition of the teeth

Looking for invariance is crazy work

a hand is a hand but what is an idea  
I had to piss into a head wind  
so I wouldn't be seen from the police station  
automobile tires float along the shore  
the world is  
a moment of time

silhouettes cut from black paper → ~~S~~

they move slowly, then

At the market, when I walked across the square  
I met a man who greeted me by raising his cap  
or rather it looked like the cap  
rose in the air by itself  
and he held the visor  
so it wouldn't drift away from him

When I opened my eyes I cried and groaned  
that I had to be born here  
the one who has closely watched  
and kept on watching the fresh inner surface of cut meat  
understands

---

what I am talking about

A gust of wind throws hay helter-skelter to me it's  
an event, a thought  
which through everything controls everything  
in the beginning was the word  
was it a cry of distress I thought  
when I looked through the greasy window  
at a boat running aground  
or a shout of joy  
when I walk along the office's maze of corridors  
and can't find my way out  
or was it a sigh  
let there be light  
I sink down in an easy chair to smoke  
passing workers look at my sweater  
angry because it doesn't show where I belong

the swans begin  
to gather  
by the cove, like parliaments  
they circulate the news in question  
they examine their condition  
I make such observations as a melancholy man makes  
the boat is  
rotted by water  
the one who sat there and rowed it  
is dead  
he died suddenly, though it had been expected  
since his life wasn't  
healthy, swans  
are mean birds, bad birds  
they run along the water on the back of the island  
I have to leave for a return trip, I think that when  
a man  
is  
dead

---

they should put him in his boat  
it is his woman  
put him carefully into the tarred boat and burn it  
near sunset so that the sun shines through the smoke  
for those who had loved the deceased  
no man's boat should be left to rot  
If I'd sit here on the boathouse steps for a moment  
You'd ask me what I am  
I am all that  
I know  
you'd ask when I'm going on a trip  
how long I'll be gone  
I'll be away until I'm here again  
You pester me with thoughtless questions  
you interrogate me  
to find out when I'll leave  
which I don't now know

The bells in the doorway   
ring  
pleasantly when it's windy  
I went into town  
as I drove across the suspension bridge I thought  
that magpies fatten up needlessly while I  
like food more than eating it, and I wondered  
whether that was fog  
or poisonous gases discharged from a factory  
Girls and boys ride along the bicycle path  
from school to home, I considered  
the world's current political issues  
can one admit as a state, a government which isn't a country  
Am I a state, yet one day  
someone coming to visit  
will quickly hang me by his belt  
the end never  
finds the beginning, I have

written with chalk on both black  
and green chalkboards  
even long sentences  
but

it doesn't help, the end never finds the beginning, maybe it's impossible

On the day when I heard  
that our tyrant died  
I went for a walk in the woods

A girl  
beautiful as a juniper bush  
ran after me to lament the dog's running away

I said, don't go into these woods  
are there lions there she said  
There are no lions but there are trees  
you'll get lost if you go in there

The dog will get lost if I...  
the girl said over her shoulder as she swung her hips

I walked into the woods  
a footprint gently imprinted in moss  
the tyrant is dead  
I picked a mushroom, smelled it and stormed off  
into the wood's deep heart  
the pine forest darkness  
it is my soul

the tyrant was dead, the girl sat on a stump

I told her to go home, she said  
I can't go home, I am lost  
you yourself said that I would be

Then why did you enter the woods when I forbid it  
Because I didn't know what getting lost means

The tyrant was dead  
a gap-toothed ancient  
walked a bicycle, he led it into a stable, I asked

who owns that woods  
My son-in-law, he said

Then tell your son-in-law to chop down the pines  
as long as you can still get some kind of price for them  
let the spruce have a chance to grow, I said  
a pine is beautiful but as raw material for paper  
it's a bad tree

You're right he snickered as he went on his way  
pine is a bad tree for making paper

I walked home, I kicked heather  
a girl held my hand and said  
in a little girl's voice that  
heather doesn't understand human speech

sounds from different directions  
all at once,  
rain, a television,  
a mouse

these are the usual voices  
but the sound of the dead is distinctive  
like the sound of a frozen mushroom  
when it is stepped on  
Nowhere at no time  
I won't want this  
but I sit on the floor with my legs crossed and hold  
on my knees those  
who built this world  
and knew the wind before I did

There have always been certain reservations about me  
and for some reason I know it and even understand  
that society can't tolerate anything  
but in my jacket  
is a secret pocket which even the police can't detect

---

in it is a heating pad, very useful in jail  
I paced in a cell, I did some calisthenics, which are poetry  
my Estonian friends in their own cells  
groan, growl, and think about themselves  
The window was painted white, the floor was linoleum  
I sat there, legs bent up, and thought  
the world was now of this size  
the guard rattled the door open  
and said  
in a severe voice

Try not to think in here

two ravens, a thought, and a memory  
flew around the earth's circumference  
these, my agents, flew without rest  
they get to sleep in the hollow of a cloud's knee  
I ride an eight-legged horse  
the ravens peck at my eyes and ears  
what has happened in the world  
in the woods where I ride a spotted orchid grows  
ferns and mushrooms  
the harness is silver  
brilliantly embellished gaiters are on the horse's eight legs  
all possible colors  
because it's day the stars are dim  
they are pearl gray  
some are almost black  
as I ride  
my eight-legged horse  
A thought says  
it's useless to ride  
the lands I thought you would get are already lost  
and memory says  
the paths your horse paved with his hooves  
are not the paths I recalled to you

---

Thought and memory look at me from the horse's frontal  
bone  
now you know



The clouds in the sky break up, a farmer walks along the edge  
of a ditch to the pasture, he thought  
what has yet to be done  
before winter's arrival, and he even thought  
about selling the woods  
In the end, the mammoths and the archaeopteryx  
are my teachers

I carve eyes in the cutting board  
to create  
a little joy for a lonely man's evening  
but the trees  
rock fearlessly in the wind

Obscurity dances  
there is no other world  
than the one he wrote about  
with his skewer on a cow's skull  
spider webs hang from his fingers when he dances  
he dances through a sentence he wrote  
You don't know anything about the world until you've seen  
a lizard eyeball-to-eyeball, so he dances  
ants climb up his legs  
they piss  
in his hair, they crawl  
into his seminal duct, they sap  
his strength, a snake  
pushes his tongue deep in his ear and whispers  
Not me  
even though I know, I won't tell

---

the tide was in, the sea iron gray  
waves swelled from shore toward the open sea  
    the wind bit his neck, what to do  
        our thoughts, our desires  
are still facial expressions, it's difficult  
    to decide beforehand and later try to explain  
I looked at a house on a mountain balcony, I remember the  
war years  
    a late summer evening on the fell  
        when adults  
        ate crayfish and clinked glasses  
    I never saw, in this  
house, any life  
        although the road surely goes there  
        it's not an abandoned house, just vacant  
I am too thin to fill out my jacket  
    Water slapped over the breakwater's stone staircase  
tiny-legged fish crept along the bottom steps  
        then night comes  
        a long-clawed night, sacred darkness  
            to load the boat  
        I push it into the water  
            not knowing  
where the sea will take the cargo, or who will unload it

The wind coughs till its lungs rupture, I sit in  
a public toilet and open my flask  
    my neighbor in the other stall opens his flask  
        he shits, I shit  
    I light a cigarette, he lights one too  
        so in this remote country  
we talk, the authority notes  
    this connection to a fellow creature  
        but I nevertheless point out  
            that this doesn't merit  
my isolation

---

The wind coughed till its lungs ruptured  
a long time ago when I was a young man

He gave me  
the arbor vitae in a kitchen crock on the table  
so I would watch it grow  
and then when it was spring  
we'd plant it together, on the northern slope  
what will happen to it — tall as a house or tower? —  
Then when it grows to full height  
I'll boil its leaves for evening tea  
he is dead

I climb a tree as high as I can  
Like a squirrel a girl comes to me

over there is the sea, I point

Arbor vitae doesn't take root in this soil  
the girl says, no one from your house dies

I swung down from the tree  
to do the daily chores

I left the oven door open and put in bread  
in the morning mice danced there like crazy drunks

I closed the door and turned the oven to high  
The subject has to know about the leader's spiritual life  
I explained my motives

then later in the day  
I leaped downhill and across puddles  
houses crouch for fear of collapsing  
a friend hurries across the market, his head bent down  
So it can rain

The grouse gets smaller but this isn't the beginning of the end, I  
said

Better one bird in the hand than two in the bush, he  
said

God has prostate trouble, I said to that

So isn't he already old, he said  
there in the market, we made faces while it rained

---

it is unwarranted, you must concede  
that God as the most active centenarian  
accomplished odds and ends  
even if he wasn't able to determine the problem of his own  
existence  
a problem

I went into a pastry shop and bought coffee and a cheese  
sandwich

I thought, there is no such world  
that of its own accord could be tangibly explained

A girl sat at the next table  
with some German, they spoke German  
the girl combed the boy's beard with her finger  
A little bird  
flew in one window and out another

I am a wolf  
which defends itself  
from the fox  
as the monkey watches

at nightfall, when sorrow reproaches me, I say goodbye to  
wandering

in the woods I asked the larch if I could take  
some of its branches  
trees don't talk much



as I walked home along the highway I saw our house  
and thought we lived there

It's not far now

the moon is in the crotch of the alder and it's cold  
sleep, sleep  
we'll soon be there

Many have passed along the road here to the sea shore  
they have gone to sea  
many have come back

---

even bringing goods, many have not returned  
sleep, sleep now

Men built a sea monster from wood and sailed  
to other lands and met natives  
they carried off casks and tools  
sleep child you're tired

Then they made ships whose masthead  
was a large-breasted girl

soon it will be winter, the dance floor will be covered by snow  
shadows meet on the snow's crust  
separate  
then run off  
sleep, now sleep, rest

boats are in their home ports

except those that stayed in foreign ports for the winter  
or those that had trouble at sea  
sleep, rest a little

the sky was now clear

I looked at the trees' leafless branches, they were like fingers  
then I went to the center of the pine forest

I thought there wasn't a greener green  
than a spruce when the skies clear after four weeks of rain

School children and old women sat in the bus  
I didn't belong to either group  
but I was there somehow crowded between them

In reality, no state is large or independent  
the sovereign falls, the autonomous is smothered  
and the large needs so many legs that it stumbles  
while I looked at the school children I thought  
and I thought as I looked at the old women  
thinking is my work

A forest birch is beautiful when the road turns up the hill  
I am also a vessel which gets shipwrecked  
certainly I'm not the world  
as a man in the crowd, I doze, my tossed hair hanging down

---

There isn't any difference  
in the faces of young and old people  
the young are already old, the aged still young  
I'm no different, just now  
I can't explain my sorrow any other way  
you can't hold on to time  
As I walked home

I looked at the sky  
my load was heavy, I walked with slow steps  
the sky was  
like newly polished copper pots, all in a row on a shelf

He looks in the distance for his destination  
he thinks his thought, a cloud's shadow  
across the meadow, he is content  
This is his thought and with it he is content  
and he sets out to sell his thought  
he puts lunch in his knapsack, two big fish eyes  
some roots, cheese  
heather blossoms and nettle leaves  
he walks along the road singing some kind of song  
in the town it's market day and he travels there  
to sell his thought  
he looks around  
somehow everything is just as it should be  
he is very happy, he knows  
the road he's carved out, and he already knows  
that his thought won't sell  
I don't talk about the world and its places  
rather, I talk about the neighborhoods and their world  
you can't contest what I say  
I started to teach the magpies table manners  
they quickly understood the idea  
that they would have to eat their food  
each sitting at his own footstool  
they can't jump on the table, there were many dissenters

---

their system is quite well-intentioned  
I thought  
that if as my duty they let me  
form a government, would I appoint my minister  
from those who jump on the table  
or from those who sit on footstools  
intended for them  
around a flat rock in the yard  
which is twenty centimeters high  
I have also placed six, twenty centimeter blocks  
as footstools for the magpies  
so they would learn their table manners  
The magpies come quickly for their breakfast when  
they see me at the kitchen table  
eating my breakfast  
and thinking, night is not a difficult matter,  
night doesn't nudge but the days  
would be impossible if the magpies despised me

In the afternoon, on Theory's road  
Folly and Malice tackled me  
Folly sat on a rotting wood pile  
with a puckered upper lip and sputtered  
you are foolish  
a little further up, under a rose bush  
Malice hid  
on a furrowed brow and yelled you are evil  
I went up the steps to the dance floor  
in the sky summer clouds enticed me  
to dance with them but I didn't want to, I felt heavy  
I lay down on the ground  
and listened to the grass

A girl woke me so I wouldn't catch cold  
brown-eyed, beautiful as wolf bane  
I said that heat and cold are the same thing

---

cold penetrates a person through the stomach  
heat through the back

I sat up and noticed that there were still two apples in the tree  
The girl laughed  
you are crazy, go eat  
mother has already set out plates  
of potatoes, meatballs, and white onion sauce

no person can expect  
to walk downstairs as quickly as up

On the grass there were fish bones which should have been  
picked up

and bird droppings  
on the rock face, but the rain will wash it off  
Classical sensibilities disappear from the picture, love and hate  
“diffugere nives,” I thought  
although it still hadn’t snowed

I wore a helmet made from a lion’s skull  
bronze eyebrows

I didn’t dare go in  
although I was hungry

mother has four breasts and her womb is as big as a royal hall

brown leaves clog the ditch, wind came from the northeast  
A pine is like a trotter training for the race, it isn’t  
nervous

I gather some wood and heat up stones till they’re warm  
I don’t give as much as the world gives you,  
except for my peace, that’s what I give you  
the wind blew so hard it was perfectly calm  
unrealized money is a disgrace for the banker

I pluck up my character with courage  
The door flies open, I hold the handle tightly  
with both hands, it’s no use  
it slams, we sit in the doorway

---

through the keyhole, we look at a world that now interests us  
a girl grows two meters  
maybe you have the key to this door she says  
so we could get down

Today I haven't seen a single person  
but when it snowed all day  
I felt like I'd dealt with everyone  
They teach us many things  
that the world is a place  
from which we need to flee  
Now as I walked along the road, the snowfall  
whitened it, defined bootprints  
when I looked over my shoulder  
as I walked I remembered  
the conversation of two old women  
baking ginger cookies may cause  
very bad problems  
for the arms, calves, or back  
as I listened I drew a mental picture  
in which a person had such a large eye that it didn't fit  
in his head  
I then tried  
to explain the rope that was tangled in knots  
I gathered straw  
and arranged it in a vase on the windowsill  
so that the one to whom I'd speak in the evening  
would be pleased

I am accused  
of not paying attention to the facts  
as though I should be a fact  
even facts have an order of precedence  
A cat jumped from the tree branch to my feet

---

I went to the woods, to get there you must  
cross a creek, you must jump over it  
then there is a steep hill  
on its slope juniper and a few spruce grow  
I wore the wrong boots for the terrain and stumbled  
I pressed my cheek to the moss, it crackled a little  
it had been a dry summer  
I was told that I can get laid in the market square  
but I'm not allowed to open my mouth  
about facts that don't concern me  
The Minister of the Interior gave me permission to go as far  
as the square  
the Foreign Minister issued his reservations  
it is a known fact  
that poets, no matter how hard they try, can't understand  
I lay down there  
I'm still lying down  
I picked lingonberries

I thought of tree leaves  
and their branches, I thought of glances  
which make me real  
they make me  
a commodity  
I should lie down  
in this work to study the world, but not myself  
since the world is all eyes which inspect me  
a severe eye, an ill-tempered whore  
On the table I have a lobster  
which straightens its tentacles as if to say something  
since it would be able to say  
a lot about this table and other aspects of its reduced  
circumstances, wooden forks  
and spoons and ladles in a salt-glaze enamel soup tureen  
there are blue designs, I move to  
examine them more closely

---

A girl sat on the rim of a shot glass  
so she could lash out at me  
you're bound to spill it, I said that  
now it's winter  
nothing to do

You could sharpen your pencils  
or these skewers she said  
you could set a trap for a rabbit, you could even do something  
that's done in winter

Can you make me a cat's tongue, thinly spread with butter  
I snarled her off then read the newspaper  
in other parts of the world they wage wars  
if there weren't newspapers, there wouldn't be wars

A girl came to say  
Can't you leave me in peace  
she came to tell me that she will build a room for herself  
as I have heard, there should be four walls and a ceiling

What will I do with the floor she asked when I asked  
a child walks with most agility on the bare ground

Build your room, build your room, but leave me alone

People  
will kill each other

I left to think it over  
I walked across the field and thought  
As long as wars are portrayed as shocking events  
they won't come to an end

must I  
travel through all epochs  
to find peace

I climbed the university's roof and shouted  
logical thinking leads to war and oppression  
no one hears  
only me

I throw bricks  
from the roof to the street  
the eaves supporting my feet

---

I think  
my toenails  
ought to be cut

This society isn't quite ready, he said  
when our leader  
drinks clabbered milk in the morning  
it dribbles into his nostrils  
There is unemployment, there are environmental problems  
a balance of trade deficit, inflation  
there is a shortage of day care centers  
they swig wine  
tax fraud is all but a way of life  
et cetera  
our leader has a nasal twang  
What does he intend to do  
after society is finished  
many now place him as guardian  
he's an educated man  
doesn't he understand  
that a completed society is *contradictio in adiecto*  
You can't continue raising objections  
a blue-headed yellow wag tail flew into the yard  
*motacilla flava*  
it had a quarrel with the magpies  
Labia swell when I lick them, clouds, ideas  
as well as all living things  
are startled, they don't want it, but they do

I had sailed around the globe three times  
and in so doing came to acquire enough to buy  
a cabin for father  
as I was working on it, the stepladder  
somehow slipped  
and my back was thrown out

---

now at nine in the morning  
every day I have to travel  
to report  
to the disability fund, since they think  
I'd booze up the money otherwise  
I asked them if I had a broken leg  
would I then have to report to them  
tersely they said you don't have a broken leg but a broken back  
and that being the case  
you must report  
they address me formally  
obviously since I am such a coarse  
looking character  
He tells my life, this ship's cook  
but I am already in the middle of a spruce forest I think about  
him  
his hair  
standing on end and his nose like a scabby potato  
on the year's longest night  
a starlit night  
a girl sits at the counter and sings  
the mice build their passageways  
Since he's afraid of death he decides to kill the girl  
he puts on outer clothing  
and slips a knife in his pocket  
they leave for the mountain  
the girl says that the bear's raspberries you  
didn't pick are frosted  
they climb the mountain, the Minotaur sleeps, she says,  
He takes her by the hand  
they walk down Theory's road  
they move close to a trash can  
and they see the stars again, the pieces of sky

---

## PENTTI SAARIKOSKI

Pentti Saarikoski (1937-1983) has been an original and prolific force in Finnish literature. His first collections, *Runoja (Poems)* and *Toisia Runoja (Other Poems)* were published in 1958. His work since then has included fourteen collections of poetry, five prose works, and forty-five translations (among them Joyce's *Ulysses* and Homer's *Odyssey*). *Hämärän tanssit (Dances of the Obscure)* was the poet's last volume as well as the concluding work of his "Tiarnia" trilogy. Among the prizes awarded to Saarikoski for his literary work are the Alexis Kivi Prize (1974) and the Finnish Cultural Foundation Prize (1975). Since his death in August, 1983, Saarikoski has become something of a legend in his native Finland, his works widely and enthusiastically received by both the public and the academy.

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